

How We Vote

Overview of American/Louisiana Voting Systems

INVESTIGATE

How have Louisiana voting practices changed since the early nineteenth century?



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Chicago Historical Society

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VOCABULARY

Ballot

Australian ballot

Party platform

Prior to the mid-1800s, voters cast their vote in public, openly announcing the candidate of their choice. Local poll workers recorded each voice vote while poll watchers ensured that the voting followed prescribed local procedures. The public nature of the **voice vote** often placed pressure on voters to support candidates backed by their employers or special interest groups.

The **secret, or Australian, ballot** originated in Australia in 1856. The U.S. adopted the practice soon afterward. Using a paper ballot, voters recorded their choice, in private, by marking the box next to the candidate or issue choice. The voter then dropped the completed paper ballot into a sealed ballot box.

In the United States, political reformers regarded the secret ballot as a means to increase voter participation and weaken political machines. The Populist Party, active in the U.S. during the 1870s through 1890s, listed the Australian ballot as one of their party platforms.

IDENTIFY

Grover Cleveland

Populist Party

Wade O. Martin

By 1884, most states used secret ballots; however, Kentucky continued to use the voice vote until 1891. In 1892, Grover Cleveland became the first President of the United States elected completely under the Australian ballot.

For most of the 19th century, political parties controlled the printing and distribution of paper ballots, also known as party tickets. While state election laws regulated the dimensions and thickness of the paper, local party officials and candidates controlled the rest of the election process. This resulted in a wide variety of voting practices and ballot forms. It also created the potential for confusion, fraud and corruption.

In large urban areas of the United States, it was common for parties to print their tickets on distinctive paper. This made it very easy for a party observer at the polling place to note which party's ballot each voter was using.

BENCHMARKS

Middle School
(C-1B-M5)
(C-1D-M2)
(C-1D-M3)
(C-1D-M4)
(C-1D-M5)

High School
(C-1D-H3)
(C-1D-H4)
(H-1B-H16)

The first official use of a lever type voting machine, known as the "Myers Automatic Booth," occurred in Lockport, New York in 1892. By the 1960s, over half of the nation's votes were cast on mechanical lever voting machines.

Mechanical Voting Machine: How It Works

Mechanical lever voting machines contain a series of levers on the front of the machine, and the name of each candidate or ballot issue choice is assigned a particular lever. A set of printed strips identifies the lever assignment for each candidate and issue choice. The voter enters the machine and presses a lever to close the privacy curtain. The voter then pulls down selected levers to indicate choices. To exit the machine and submit the choices, the voter pulls a handle. The handle opens the privacy curtain and automatically returns the levers to their original horizontal position. As each lever returns, it causes a connected counter wheel within the machine to turn one-tenth of a full rotation. Sets of counter wheels controlled the mathematical columns (ones, tens, hundreds, etc). The position of each counter at the close of the polls indicates the number of votes cast on the lever that drives it.

EXPLORE

Use the Louisiana Secretary of State's Web site to find the answers to the following questions.

www.sos.louisiana.gov

What are the requirements for voting in your state?

How and where do citizens register to vote in your state?

Why is it important for all citizens to vote?

Where do people who live in your neighborhood vote?

What percentage of your state's registered voters voted in the last statewide election?

Which age groups had the highest and lowest percentage of registered voters actually vote?

Louisiana Secretary of State Wade O. Martin first introduced mechanical voting machines into Louisiana elections during the early 1940s. At that time, there were two major manufacturers of mechanical voting machines in the United States. One was the Automatic Voting Machine Corporation of Jamestown, New York, which began producing voting machines in 1896. The other was Shoup Voting Machine Co. of Gerry, New York. Since neither company could produce the numbers of machines required to fill the Louisiana order within the time specified, Louisiana ordered machines from both manufacturers, with one type of machine used throughout an entire congressional district. As the Shoup voting machines were already in use in Orleans, East Baton Rouge, Calcasieu and Caddo parishes, the AVM systems were installed in other parts of the state.

Both the AVM and Shoup machines had 500 voting levers and the security features required by the Voting Machine Law of 1952. Ballot placement was the only major difference between the two types of machines. The AVM machine used a horizontal ballot placement with most of the ballot at the eye level of the voter. The Shoup Voting Machine had a vertical ballot placement. Both types of machines were in use in Louisiana until 2001.

Louisiana introduced the AVC Advantage **electronic voting machine** to voters in 1991. In 2005, the machine was adapted to meet the needs of the disabled and to comply with federal standards. The new AVC Advantage voting systems are wheelchair accessible and capable of using an audio voting keypad, which is available to voters with disabilities. In 2006, all Louisiana's voters began using the AVC Advantage electronic voting machine.

ELECTRONIC VOTING MACHINE: HOW IT WORKS

The new voting systems contain a touch-sensitive network of switches and are smaller, lighter and easier to operate than the old lever-operated machines. The voter enters through the curtains and votes by pressing a black arrow next to each choice in each race on the ballot. Blinking lights above each race indicate that no choice has been made in that race. To correct a mistake, the voter can press the black arrow by the incorrect choice and can then select the correct choice.

When finished, the voter presses a "Cast Vote" button in the lower-right corner of the voting machine. A record of the vote is recorded internally to three sets of battery-powered RAM memory. When the polls close, poll workers remove cartridges of battery-powered RAM containing the vote records from each machine. At this point, depending on local election procedure and regulations, the cartridges can be transported to a tabulation facility or the information can be sent over a modem.

ACT

Active citizens make a difference! Here are some ways you can be an active citizen.

Participate in a voter registration drive.

Use voting machines in your next school or class election. Contact Naomi Guidroz with Elections Outreach at 225-342-4479.

Go to the polls and vote with your parents.

Conduct a survey to find out why people do (and do not) vote.

Punch Card Systems

The first punch card systems were used in Georgia during the 1964 presidential primary election. By the 1970s, it became the most popular voting system in the United States and remained so for 30 years. Punch card voting was an inexpensive alternative to mechanical lever voting machines.

Punch card systems employ a card or set of cards and a small clipboard-sized device for recording votes. Using the supplied punch device, voters punch holes in the cards opposite their candidate or ballot issue choice. The resulting leftover piece of paper is called a piece of chad.

The frequency of incompletely punched ballots has given rise to new election terms such as hanging chad and swinging chad. Hanging chad means one corner of the chad is hanging onto the punch card. Swinging chad means two corners are attached to the ballot card; tri chad means three corners are hanging but the hole has been punched. Pregnant chad means a hole is punched through the chad but it still hangs on all four sides, and dimpled chad means there is an indent in the chad but no clean hole has been punched.

Classroom Activities

1. Prepare a graphic organizer that shows the many ways Louisiana citizens have voted since Louisiana became a state.
2. Form a small discussion circle of three or four students. Use facts and your opinions to discuss the following statement:

Over the last 200 years, changes in Louisiana's voting methods have increased democracy in our state.
3. Explore the **U.S. Voting Timeline** to discover who could and could not vote throughout Louisiana and American history. Investigate one group that gained the right to vote in the United States after 1850.

<http://education.sos.louisiana.gov/voting%20rights.swf>